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A Tentative Catalogue of Minsi Material Culture

by Vernon Leslie

READERS of the "Archaeologist" will recall that one of the major problems of the archaeology of northeastern Pennsylvania has been the identification of the culture of the Minsi Indians with one of the several archaeological manifestations which occur in this area.

The Minsi, it will be remembered, were the northern clan of the Delaware inhabiting the upper Delaware Valley above the Water Gap as well as adjacent areas in New York. Although mention of them is to be found in written history, the Minsi make such a brief appearance there that at present very little can be learned from early writings concerning their material culture or ethnic peculiarities.

In my treatment of certain problems of the archaeology of the upper Delaware Valley published serially in the four issues of the "Pennsylvania Archaeologist" ending with that of Vol. XVII, No. 1, 1947, because of the paucity of evidence then available, I made no attempt definitely to describe Minsi culture by implement type or otherwise. Two possibilities were mentioned ("Archaeologist", Vol. XVI, No. 2, p. 73; idem, Vol. XVII, No. 1, p. 108): that the Minsi culture could possibly be the mysterious "Coastal" culture which I had identified in the upper Delaware Valley (which will be referred to again briefly in the conclusion of the present paper) or that it could possibly be identified with an Owasco-like manisfestation occurring on several sites in the area, particularly in

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A Tentative Catalogue of Minsi Material Culture

by VERNON LESLIE

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the vicinity of Milford, Pike Co., Pa. Dr. William A. Ritchie in his "Pre-Iroquoian Occupations of New York", pp. 56-57, had previously indicated the possibility of Owasco-Lenape connections.

In my report I also mentioned the occurrence of sherds on upper Delaware sites and in rock shelters (see Schrabisch, "Archaeology of the Delaware River Valley between Hancock and Dingman's Ferry in Wayne and Pike Counties", 1930) which were typologically Iroquois. Early in the spring of 1947 while looking over a site in Pike County, Pennsylvania, opposite the upper end of Minisink Island, I was struck by the possibility that the true explanation of the Minsi cultural enigma could lie in a combination of the Owasco and Iroquois elements present on several surface sites as well as in Schrabisch's rock shelters and in the Heye-Pepper excavation opposite Minisink Island in New Jersey (see "Exploration of a Munsee Cemetery near Montague, New Jersey", Heye, Pepper, 1915). This combination was viewed in my new theory as having resulted from acculturation brought about by the imposing of Iroquois elements upon an Owasco base. There is considerable historical evidence in support of such a possibility since the Algonkian Delaware are described as having been subjected by the Iroquois. One assumption is left hanging in the air here, however: that the pre-acculturation Algonkian Minsi were pure Owasco in culture.

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[P.10,A]

114 The possibilities of this 'acculturation
174 theory' seemed so appealing that I sent a letter to Dr. Claude Schaeffer, then of the Pennsylvania State Museum in Harrisburg, who was handling the publication of my manuscript, asking him to append my new view of the Minsi problem as a concluding footnote. For some reason which was never explained to me, however, this was not done.

Meanwhile in Rochester, Dr. William A. Ritchie, and in Philadelphia, Dr. Edmund S. Carpenter, were laying plans for a 1947 summer expedition in the upper Delaware area under an Indiana Historical Society grant for the purpose of attacking the Minsi problem as a phase of the wider question of determining the validity of the Walum Olum. The results of this expedition, with which the writer was for a time associated, have been ably and fully set forth by Dr. Ritchie in "The Bell-Philhower Site, Sussex County, New Jersey", Volume III, Number 2, Prehistory Research Series, The Indiana Historical Society, 1949.

The most important part of Ritchie's report bearing upon the present problem is the material contained on pages 194, 195, and 196. Briefly, Ritchie, while including the caution that the "evidence leaves something to be desired", concludes that the original Minsi Culture began as the Castle Creek Focus of the Owasco Aspect and was later modified by Unami and later still by Iroquoian elements.

121 In the light of the developments outlined in the foregoing, it is now possible to approach a description of the elements of Minsi material culture. It is obviously of value and interest to the numerous amateur and occasional professional archaeologists who do field work in the Minsi area to have at least a tentative idea of which artifacts can be assigned to the Minsi hori-

[P.10, B]

121 zon in order that Minsi material may be separated from artifacts pertaining to earlier occupations. The writer herewith presents what he considers to be a reasonably valid list of elements pertaining to Minsi material culture. This list cannot in the light of our present knowledge pretend to anything approaching final inclusiveness or conclusiveness. It is the 1951 model and all rights to make subsequent changes are reserved.

127 In this list I have, of course, leaned heavily upon Ritchie's Bell-Philhower report as well as my own researches both prior to and following the Bell-Philhower "dig". I would also like to acknowledge much valuable assistance derived from access to the splendid collection of material from Minisink Island in the collection of Mr. Rudolph Ludwig, Milford, Pa.

Ceramics

Pipes

172 276 323 So far as the writer has been able to determine, no stone pipes attributable to the Minsi have been found in the upper Delaware area or elsewhere. Pipes of pottery occur, but are not numerous. These pottery pipes may be tubular, effigy, or obtuse—angle elbow. (Plate 1, No. 2). [531] Decoration may consist of pointillé, incised lines, corded stick impressions, or may be absent. (Plate 1, Nos. 1 and 3, shows pointillé-decorated pipe sherds.)

Vessels

172 415 323 Pottery may be of various Owasco types (Castle Creek Epigonus is rather prominent) with punctuate, corded, platted, and beaded designs of several forms, or of Iroquoian types with incised designs in herringbone and other patterns. Rims often exhibit castellations. (See Plate 2. The sherds in the top row and the sherd at the left in the bottom row exhibit Owasco features. The remainder are primarily Iroquoian in motif.) An excellent description

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[P. 11, A]
An excellent description
172 of Owasco ceramics is contained in Ritchie's
323 "Pre-Iroquoian Occupations of New York
415 State". A reading of this should precede
[114] any serious approach to the study of what we presently believe to be Minsi pottery.

The bodies of Minsi vessels ordinarily are corded in some fashion. Ritchie assigns the greatest frequency to a finely corded body treatment with smoothed-over cord second, smooth third, and coarsely corded fourth. It is to be noted that other body techniques occur on occasion such as corded stick imprinted and brushed-over cord.

Miniature vessels occur in this culture. The writer has never seen any from the Milford area which were not crude, including one, partially complete, excavated by him from the Bell-Philhower Site late in 1947. (Plate 3).

It may be remarked in connection with this all too brief description of 'Minsi' pottery vessels that one of the stumbling blocks in the path of a final and conclusive acceptance of the Owasco-cum-Iroquois explanation of the ultimate Minsi Culture is the fact that to the best of my knowledge no sherd or vessel has yet been found on a presumed Minsi site embodying an indeniable combination of pronounced Owasco and Iroquoian decorative techniques. This statement is made with full awareness, however, that the so-called Castle Creek Epigonus pottery may represent a combination of decorative motifs.

Pottery Effigies

172 In the light of the finding by the writer
323 of the pottery effigy of an animal head on
532 the Bell site in 1949, there can be little doubt that objects of this type must be included in the material culture of the Minsi.

The object in question (Plate 4, Nos. 1 and 2) is complete with the exception of the ears and a small part of the lower por-

[P. 11, B]

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tion of the face. The hole in the dorsal surface (shown in Plate 4, No. 2) is connected with the holes indicating the eyes. No explanation for the purpose of this dorsal hole or indeed of the entire specimen can be attempted at this time.

Bone

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Bone and antler artifacts do not appear to be abundant on Minsi sites. On occasion, the bone awl, antler flakers of cylindrical form, combs, turtle-shell cups, perforated deer phalanges, perforated needles, antler picks, beaming tools, and short bone tubes, probably used as ornaments, are found.

Shell

At the present time, because of an almost total lack of evidence, (the Bell-Philhower Site report lists one shell bead found by Mr. Charles A. Philhower in a pit of the historical period and worked fragments of conch) the writer is not prepared to discuss the possible incidence of shell artifacts in the prehistoric Minsi Culture. In common with Ritchie ("Bell-Philhower Site", p. 178) he refers the interested reader to the Heye-Pepper report, "Exploration of a Munsee Cemetery" for a description of numerous shell ornaments, etc., from the *historic* Minsi site adjacent to the Bell-Philhower component.

ugh Stone

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Net sinkers are of two well-defined types: flat pebbles with two opposed notches, and sinkers made of thin sheets of stone chipped into circular or rectangular shape with two opposed notches. These 'trimmed sinkers' may have notches formed by chipping, or rarely, by grinding. (Plate 5, No. 3, shows notched flat pebble; Plate 5, No. 1, shows trimmed sinker with chipped notches; No. 3 of the same plate is a trimmed ground-notch sinker.)

Sinkers of both types may range in size from an inch to six or seven inches in

[P.12,A]

172 227 324 length. (Plate 11, Nos. 1 and 5, shows very small sinkers, No. 1 being the chipped type and No. 5, a notched pebble.) Caches of sinkers occur in this culture, the writer having uncovered a hoard of 28 specimens in 1936 and another of six specimens in 1948. (Plate 6 shows the six specimens contained in the latter find.)

Hammerstones, Hoes, Lap-Stones

172 324 412 Hammerstones consisting of simple bi-pitted pebbles (Plate 7, No. 2), rudely chipped triangular or oval stone hoes, and lap-stones or metates occur in this culture. One so-called lap-stone found in a pit on the Bell-Philhower Site late in 1947 consists of a roughly-shaped oblong block of very fine sandstone 3 in. thick, 11½ in. long, and 8 in. wide. Both faces are slightly concave.

Roller Pestles

Minsi roller pestles are generally very well made. Some are very long, exceeding 18 inches in length. One found by the writer shortly after the flood of 1936 is nearly 14 inches long and bears on one end the crude effigy of what appears to be a reptile head. (Plate 8).

Stone Discs

One stone disc in the writer's collection was washed out by the 1936 flood on the Davenport Site near Milford, Pa. It was found intimately associated with sherds of Minsi type. This specimen is 1¼ inches thick and is slightly over 4 inches in diameter. It was probably used as a muller in common with certain pebbles of fine sandstone occurring on Minsi sites. These pebbles show wear on one or both faces. (For illustration of stone disc, see Plate 9, No. 2.) It is to be observed that the type of stone disc under discussion here is not the kind of chipped disc (net sinker) mentioned in the Bell-Philhower report, p. 237.

[P. 12, B]

Sinew Stones

172 324 412 In the Milford area it is possible on occasion to recover egg-shaped (and sized) pebbles almost completely encircled by shallow pecked grooves. Ritchie in the Bell-Philhower report, p. 175, refers to them as "partly grooved thick pebble sinkers". The present writer has never found this explanation of their use to be entirely satisfactory (Plate 7, Nos. 1 and 3.)

Stone Faces

172 324 532 Under the category of rough stone it is proper to include the stone faces which now and then turn up on Minsi sites. To the writer's knowledge, at least five of these have been found in the Milford area, one splendid specimen from Minisink Island (Plate 10) being presently in the collection of Mr. Rudolph Ludwig. According to [196] numerous authorities, these rough-tone effigies were used in the Lenni-Lenapé Big House Ceremony.

Polished Stone Artifacts

Celts

172 324 412 The inventory of Minsi polished stone artifacts is not large. Most prominent in this category is the so-called 'thick-polled celt' (Plate 9, Nos. 1 and 3). It is to be observed that some of these are almost restagular in cross-section, others more nearly oval.

Small Chisels

Well made "miniature celts" in the form of small narrow chisels or of small pebbles with a celt-like edge are among the most interesting and unusual Minsi artifacts. Some (Plate 1, No. 8) are beautifully made. In my opinion, this type of implement is important in the identification of Minsi-occupied sites. Several years ago the writer published in the "Pennsylvania Archaeologist" (Vol. IX, No. 3) a brief discussion of the possible use of these small tools. In that article it was suggested

[P.13,A]

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that they were possibly used to incise pottery. (For illustrations of several of these chisels found in the Milford area, see Plate 1, Nos. 7 to 13.)

Gorgets and Pendants

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The Bell-Philhower report mentions gorgets and pendants as being possible Minsi traits (pp. 174 and 236) on the basis of the reported finding of a gorget by Mr. Charles A. Philhower in a pit in association with a mat needle and a pottery vessel of Owasco type. This view is further supported by the mention of Owasco parallels and by a reference to the discovery of a pendant by Heye and Pepper during their excavation of the adjacent Minsi site of the historic period.

The probability of the occurrence of both the gorget and the pendant in the inventory of Minsi cultural traits must be freely accepted, but it cannot be maintained that the matter is conclusively settled on the basis of present evidence—particularly as regards the gorget. It may be observed in connection with this problem that in this area the gorget is generally to be regarded as associated with the "middle" period rather than the "late" to which the Minsi belong. This does not, however, rule out the possibility of a weak survival or borrowing of this cultural trait.

Paint Stone

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In the summer of 1948 the writer found on the surface of the Bell-Philhower Site a thin rectangular piece of hematite with concave surfaces on each side exhibiting the marks of abrasion (Plate 1, No. 4). The obvious conclusion is that this object was used as a source of pigment, probably for personal adornment. While its occurrence on the surface gives rise to a certain element of doubt concerning its cultural affiliation, it is almost certainly of Minsi origin.

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Chipped Stone Artifacts

Arrowpoints

172 324 411 Most prominent in the category of Minsi chipped stone implements is the triangular arrowpoint. While several forms of triangular points occur, the vast majority of Minsi points are equilateral triangles with concave bases. A considerable number of equilateral triangular points also occur with straight bases. (Plate 11, Nos. 14 and 11, shows concave-base points; Nos. 11, 12, and 13 have straight bases.)

[803] The materials of which Minsi chipped implements found in the Milford area are made include jasper (brown, yellow, red), argillite, black, white and gray chert, and a chalcedony-like material. By far the most commonly-used of these materials were argillite and black chert.

Knives

172 324 412 Although knives of several types (ovate, large triangular, broad side-notched, etc.) have been found on sites generally conceded to be Minsi, this kind of implement is not typical of the culture.

Scrapers

Both side scrapers, consisting of retouched flakes, and end scrapers occur in the Minsi Culture, but not to the extent that they are found in the much older Laurentian horizon.

The most prominent, in fact, almost the exclusive form of end scraper is the ovate type. The keeled back form is a very poor second and while occurring, is, like the chipped knife, not typical of the culture. (Plate 11, Nos. 7, 8, 9, shows end scrapers from a large site near Milford, Pa., generally conceded to be Minsi.)

Drills

Although Ritchie's statistics (Bell-Philhower report, p. 236) would lead one to the conclusion that drills are comparatively minor artifacts in the total Minsi series,

[P.14, A]

172 the writer has found that these implements
324 occur generally on Minsi sites. It is pos-
412 sible that they deserve more significance than Ritchie's tables would indicate. Ritchie (op. cit., p. 236) lists five types: expanded base, expanded side-notched base, expanded scraper base, T-shaped base, and Y-shaped base. Presently available statistics do not permit a selection of the most common form or forms (Plate 11, Nos. 2, 3, 4, 6).

Trade Goods

172 Any trade goods found in the upper
439 Delaware area are almost certainly surviving evidence of the period of Minsi-Caucasian contact. In general, trade material is extremely rare, evidencing the fact that the contact period was of very short duration in this area. One notable exception to this general paucity of trade material is that part of the Bell Site excavated by Heye and Pepper early in the second decade of the present century. In their exploration, Heye and Pepper found numerous articles of European or Colonial origin, including beads, metal kettles, etc. (See their "Exploration of a Munsee Cemetery near Montague, N. J.", 1915.)

The writer has found only two artifacts evidencing Caucasian contact: a sheet brass triangular arrowpoint from the Davenport Site across the Delaware from Milford, Pa., found on the surface in 1934, and a small perforated triangular ornament of catlinite from near Cocheton, Sullivan Co., N. Y. (Plate 11, No. 10, shows the brass arrowpoint; Plate 1, No. 6, is the catlinite ornament.)

Summary

172 With the exception of numerous pottery decorative patterns within the framework of certain Owasco and Iroquoian ceramic techniques, it is evident that Minsi material culture is not characterized by variety. This is, of course, an example of a cultural

172 trend to be noted elsewhere in the Northeast, notably among the Iroquois, in accordance with which there was a definite limitation and specialization of stone artifact types in the later periods of occupation which immediately preceded white contact. Among the Iroquois, for example, there was an almost total concentration upon the use of a single type of triangular arrowpoint. Among the Minsi, we likewise see a preference for one type of triangular arrowpoint, but differing from the Iroquois in having a concave base.

Collectors and others having material from sites in this area usually fail to realize that their proudly exhibited bannerstones, grooved axes, and wide varieties of stemmed and notched arrowpoints were not produced by the Indians whom we associate with the colonial period and the period immediately preceding, but rather were made by peoples who occupied the upper Delaware Valley long before the beginning of recorded American history.

With a fairly definite description of the Minsi cultural pattern, we have succeeded in reducing considerably the proportion of what is known to what is unknown in the archaeology of northeastern Pennsylvania. Two well-defined complexes, the Laurentian and the Minsi, have been recognized here. The largest single problem now remaining is to separate, identify, and equate with others in the Northeast the third pattern which seems to be present. This pattern, in the writer's opinion, immediately preceded the Minsi occupation which closed the local prehistoric period. It produced grooved axes, steatite vessels, gorgets, and a variety of arrowpoint forms, including stemmed types. Whether clay pottery was used is open to question. This pre-Minsi period seems to have been allied to the so-called Coastal Culture, a culture which at present seems to be the untouchable of northeastern archaeology.

[P.15, A]

172 It is suggested that more work be done on this Coastal pattern by our professional archaeologists and, finally, that the organizations and individuals who have already

[P.15, B]

172 worked on it would do well to fulfill their scientific obligations by publishing their results.

[P.15, C]

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PLATE I. MINSI ARTIFACTS

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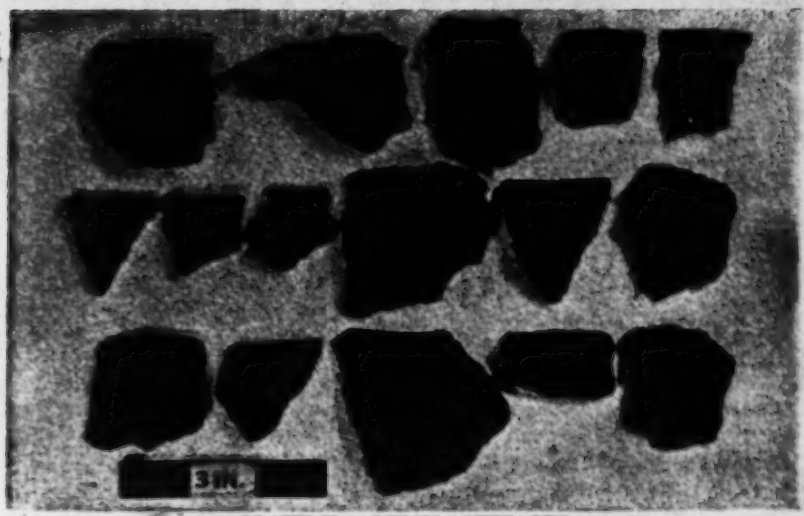

PLATE II. MINSI ARTIFACTS

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PLATE III. MINSI ARTIFACT

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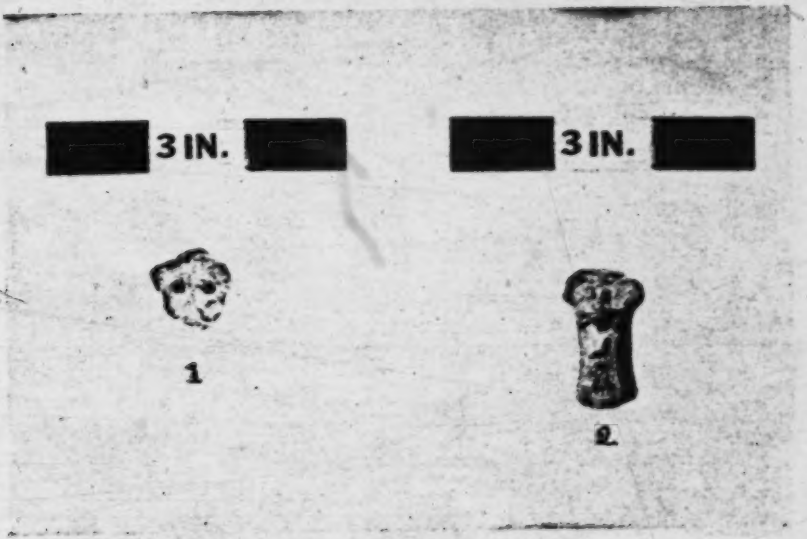

PLATE IV. MINSI ARTIFACT

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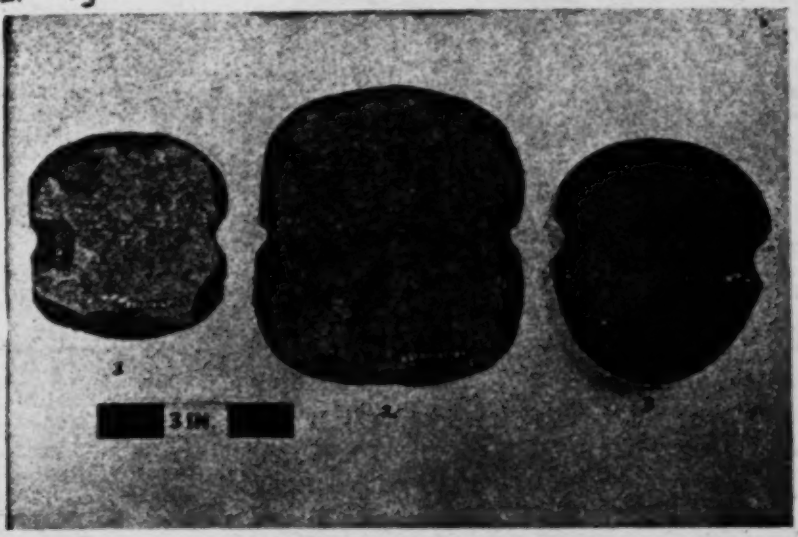

PLATE V. MINSI ARTIFACTS

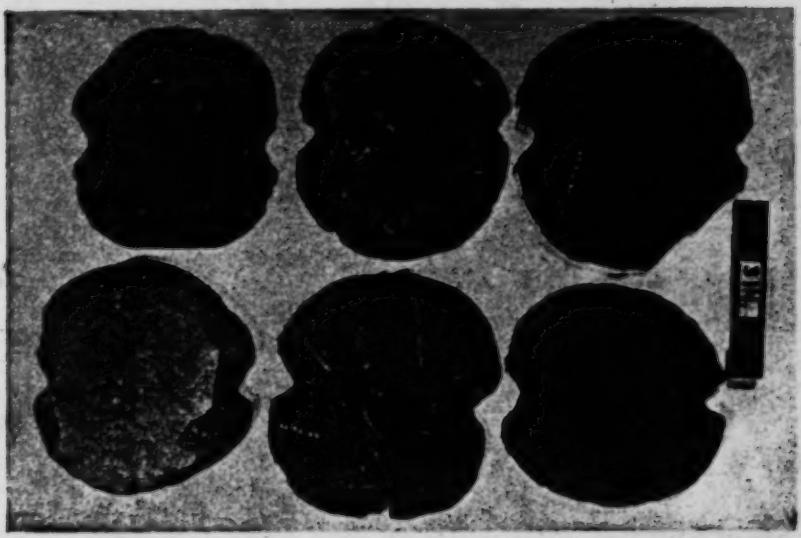

PLATE VI. MINSI ARTIFACTS

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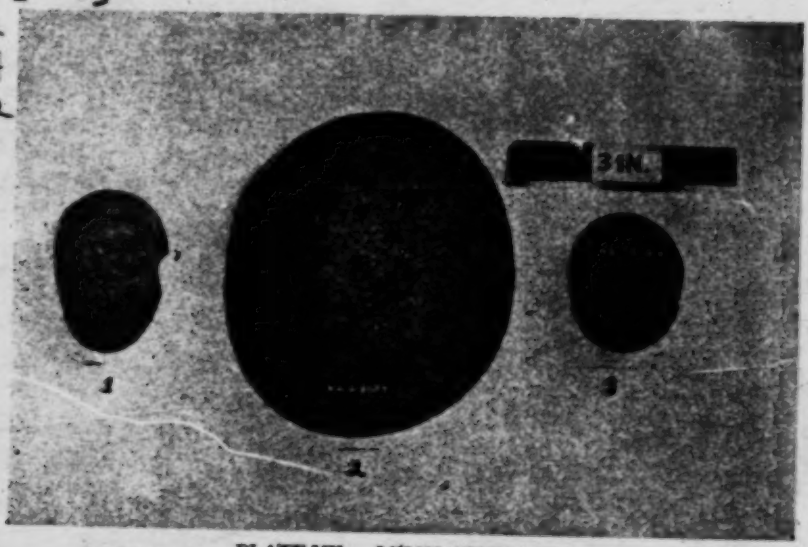

PLATE VII. MINSI ARTIFACTS

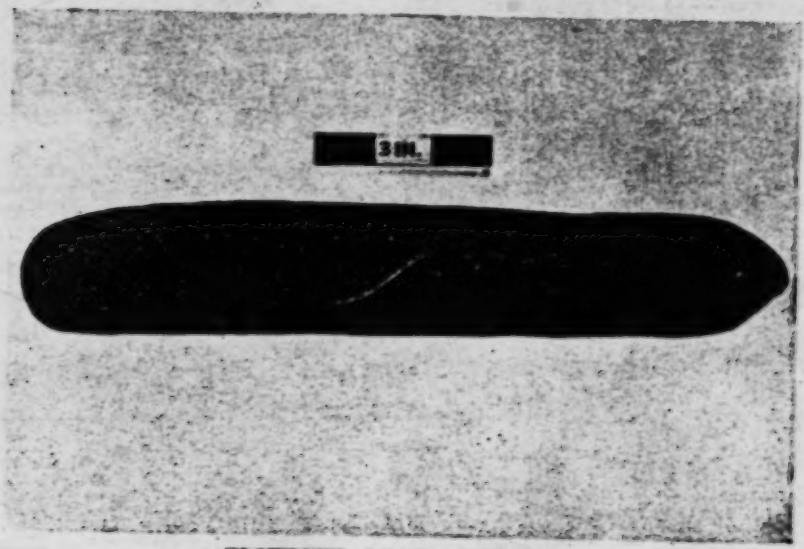

PLATE VIII. MINSI ARTIFACT

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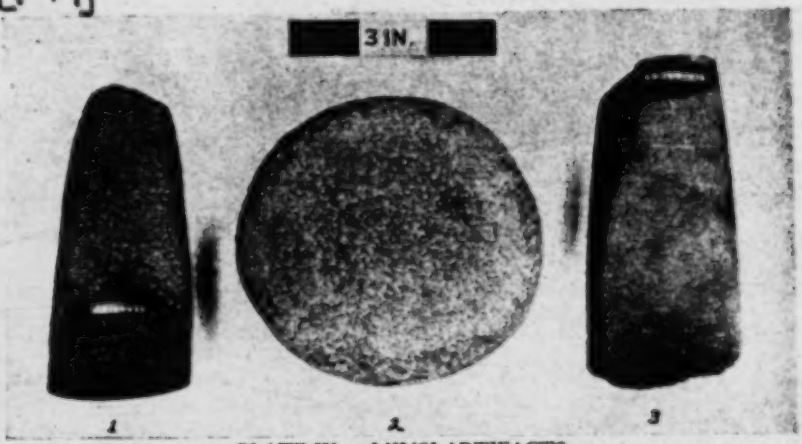

PLATE IX. MINSI ARTIFACTS

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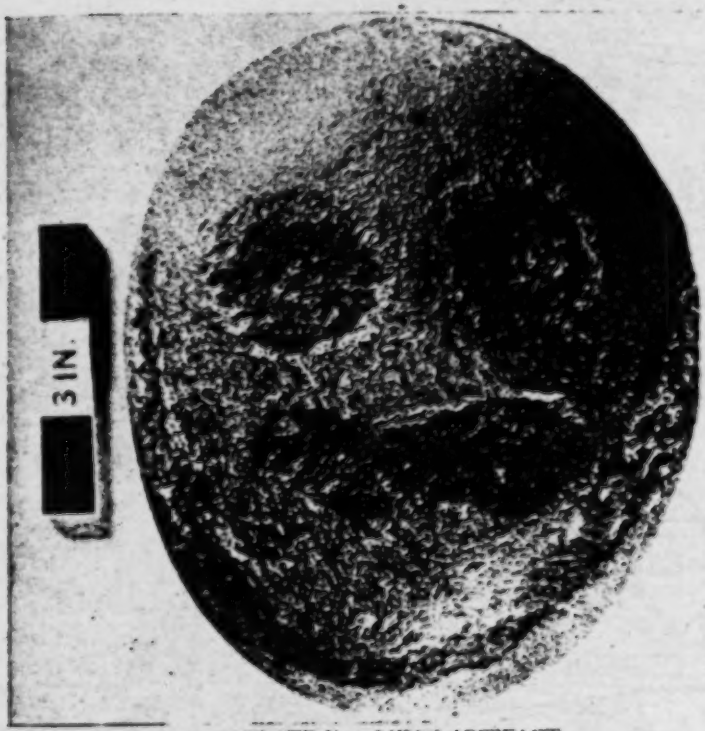

PLATE X. MINSI ARTIFACT

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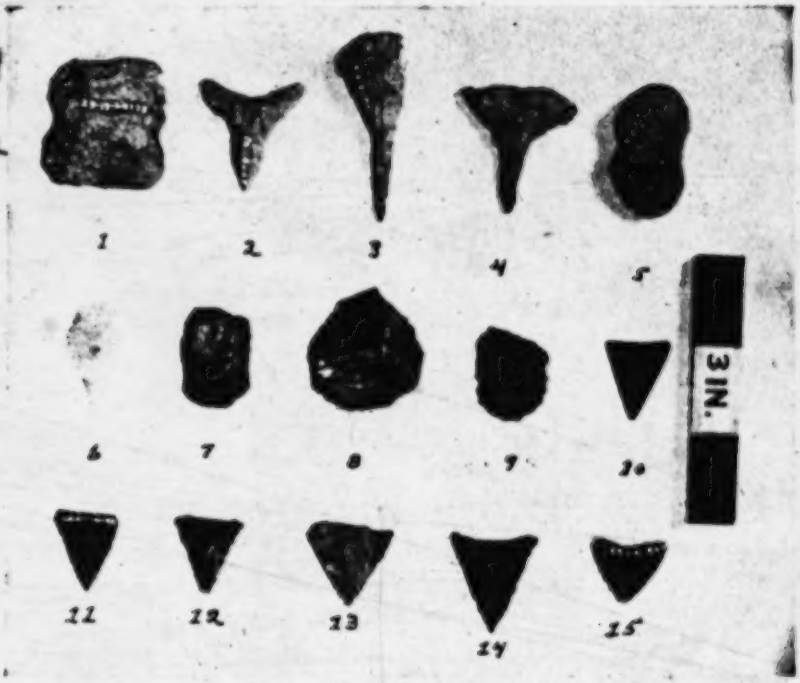

PLATE XI. MINSI ARTIFACTS